The decimation of the First Peoples of Van Diemen’s Land (now Tasmania) was systematic and swift. First Contact was an emotionally, intellectually, physically, and spiritually confronting series of encounters for the Indigenous inhabitants. There were, according to some early records, a few examples of peaceful interactions (Morris 84). Yet, the inevitable competition over resources, and the intensity with which colonists pursued their “claims” for food, land, and water, quickly transformed amicable relationships into hostile rivalries.

Jennifer Gall has written that, “European settlement expanded in the late 1820s, violent exchanges between settlers and Aboriginal people were frequent, brutal and unchecked” (58). Indeed, the near-annihilation of the original custodians of the land was facilitated by the lens of time, a process that could be described as one that was especially efficient. As John Morris notes:

> in 1803, when the first settlers arrived in Van Diemen’s Land, the Aboriginals had already inhabited the island for some 25,000 years and the population has been estimated at 4,000. Seventy-three years later, Truganinni, [often cited as] the last Tasmanian of full Aboriginal descent, was dead. (84)

Against a backdrop of extreme violence, often referred to as the Black War (Clements 1), there were some, admittedly dubious, efforts to contain the bloodshed. One such effort, in the late 1820s, was the production, and subsequent distribution, of a set of Proclamation Boards.

Approximately 100 Proclamation Boards (the Board) were introduced by the Lieutenant Governor of the day, George Arthur (after whom Port Arthur on the Tasman Peninsula is named). The purpose of these Boards was to communicate, via a four-strip pictogram, to the Indigenous peoples of the island colony that all people—black and white—were considered equal under the law. “British Justice would protect” everyone (Morris 84). This is reflected in the narrative of the Boards. The first image presents Indigenous peoples and colonists living peacefully together. The second, and central, image shows “a conciliatory handshake between the British governor and an Aboriginal ‘chief’, highly reminiscent of images found in North America on treaty medals and anti-slavery tokens” (Darian-Smith and Edmonds 4). The third and fourth images depict the inhabitants committing murder with an Indigenous man hanged for spearing a colonist and a European man also hanged for shooting an Aborigine. Both men executed under “gubernatorial supervision” (Turnbull 53).

The Board is an interesting re-imagining of one of the traditional methods of communication for Indigenous peoples; the leaving of images on the bark of trees. Such trees, often referred to as scarred trees, are rare in modern-day Tasmania as “the expansion of settlements, and the impact of bush fires and other environmental factors” resulted in many of these trees being destroyed (Aboriginal Heritage Tasmania online). Similarly, only a few of the Boards, inspired by these trees, survive today.

The Proclamation Board was, in the 1860s, re-imagined as the output of a different Governor: Lieutenant Governor Davey (after whom Port Davey, on the south-west coast of Tasmania is named). This re-imagining of the Board’s creator was so effective that the Board, today, is popularly known as Governor Davey’s Proclamation to the Aborigines.

This paper outlines several other re-imaginings of this Board. In addition, this paper offers another, new, re-imagining of the Board, positing that this is an early “pamphlet” on crime, justice and punishment which actually presents as a pre-cursor to the modern Australian true crime tale. In doing so this work connects the Proclamation Board to the larger genre of crime fiction.

One Proclamation Board: Two Governors

Labelled Van Diemen’s Land and settled as a colony of New South Wales in 1803, this island state would secede from the administration of mainland Australia in 1825. Another change would follow in 1856 when Van Diemen’s Land was, in another process of re-imagining, officially named Tasmania. This change in nomenclature was an initiative to, symbolically at least, separate the contemporary state from a past criminal and violent past (Newman online).

Tasmania’s violent history was, perhaps, inevitable. The island was claimed by Philip Gidley King, the Governor of New South Wales, in the name of His Majesty, not for the purpose of building a community, but to “prevent the French from gaining a footing on the east side of that island” and also to procure “timber and other natural products, as well as to raise grain and to promote the seal industry” (Clark 36). Another rationale for this land claim was to “divide the convicts” (Clark 36) which re-fashioned the island into a gaol. It was this penal element of the British colonisation of Australia that saw the worst of the British Empire forced upon the Aboriginal peoples. As historian Clive Turnbull explains:

> the brutish state of England was reproduced in the English colonies, and that in many ways its brutishness was increased, for now there came to Australia not the humanitarians or the indifferent, but the men who had vested interests in the systems of restraint; among those who suffered restraint were not only a vast number who were merely unfortunate and poverty-stricken—the victims of a ‘depression’—but brutalised persons, child-slaughterers and even potential cannibals. (Turnbull 25)

As noted above the Black War of Tasmania saw unprecedented aggression against the rightful occupants of the land. Yet, the Aboriginal peoples were “promised the white man’s justice, the people [were] exhorted to live in amity with them, the wrongs which they suffer [were] deplored” (Turnbull 23). The administrators purported an egalitarian society, one of integration and peace but Van Diemen’s Land was colonised as a prison and as a place of profit. So, “like many apologists whose material benefit is bound up in the systems which they defend” (Turnbull 23), assertions of care for the health and welfare of the Aboriginal peoples were made but were not supported by sufficient policies, or sufficient will, and the Black War continued.

Colonel Thomas Davey (1758-1823) was the second person to serve as Lieutenant Governor of Van Diemen’s Land; a term of office that began in 1813 and concluded in 1817. The fourth Lieutenant Governor of the island was Colonel Sir George Arthur (1784-1854); his term of office, significantly longer than Davey’s, being from 1824 to 1836. The two men were very different but are connected through this intriguing artefact, the Proclamation Board.

The date on Frankland’s correspondence clearly situates the Proclamation Board within Arthur’s tenure as Lieutenant Governor. The Board was, however, in the 1860s, re-imagined as the output of Davey. The Clerk of the Tasmanian House of Assembly, Hugh M. Hull, asserted that the Board was the work of Davey and not Arthur. Hull’s rationale for this, despite archival evidence connecting the Board to Frankland and, by extension, to Arthur, is predominantly anecdotal. In a letter to the editor of The Hobart Mercury, published 26 November 1874, Hull wrote:

this curiosity was shown by me to the late Mrs Bateman, neé Pitt, a lady who arrived here in 1804, and with whom I went to school in 1822. She at once recognised it as one of a number prepared in 1816, under Governor Davey’s orders; and said she had seen one hanging on a gum tree at Cottage Green—now Battery Point. (3)

Hull went on to assert that “if any old gentleman will look at the picture and remember the style of military and civil dress of 1810-15, he will find that Mrs Bateman was right” (3). Interestingly, Hull relies upon the recollections of a deceased school friend and the dress codes depicted by the artist to date the Proclamation Board as a product of 1816, in lieu of documentary evidence dating the Board as a product of 1828-1830.

Curiously, the citation of dress can serve to undermine Hull’s argument. An early 1840s watercolour by Thomas Bock, of Mathinna, an Aboriginal child of Flinders Island adopted by Lieutenant Governor John Franklin (Felton online), features the young girl wearing a brightly coloured, high-waisted dress. This dress is very similar to the dresses worn by the children on the Proclamation Board (the difference being that Mathinna wears a red dress with a contrasting waistband, the children on the Board wear plain yellow dresses) (Bock). Acknowledging the simplicity of children’s clothing during the colonial era, it could still be argued that it would have been unlikely the Governor of the day would have placed a child, enjoying at that time a life of privilege, in a situation where she sat for a portrait wearing an old-fashioned garment.

So effective was Hull’s re-imagining of the Board’s creator that the Board was, for many years, popularly known as Governor Davey’s Proclamation to the Aborigines with even the date modified, to 1816, to fit Davey’s term of office. Further, it is worth noting that catalogue records acknowledge the error of attribution and list both Davey and Arthur as men connected to the creation of the Proclamation Board.

A Surviving Board: Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales

One of the surviving Proclamation Boards is held by the Mitchell Library. The Boards, oil on Huon pine, were painted by “convict artists incarcerated in the island penal colony” (Carroll 73). The work was mass produced (by the standards of mass production of the day) by pouncing, “a technique [of the Italian Renaissance] of pricking the contours of a drawing with a pin. Charcoal was then dusted on to the drawing” (Carroll 75-76). The images, once outlined, were painted in oil. Of approximately 100 Boards made, several survive today. There are seven known Boards within public collections (Gall 58): five in Australia (Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW, Sydney; Museum Victoria, Melbourne; National Library of Australia, Canberra; Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart; and Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, Launceston); and two overseas (The Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University and the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, University of Cambridge).

The catalogue record, for the Board held by the Mitchell Library, offers the following details:

Paintings:

1 oil painting on Huon pine board, rectangular in shape with rounded corners and hole at top centre for suspension ; 35.7 x 22.6 x 1 cm.

4 scenes are depicted:

1. Aborigines and white settlers in European dress mingling harmoniously
2. Aboriginal men and women, and an Aboriginal child approach Governor Arthur to shake hands while peaceful soldiers look on
3. A hostile Aboriginal man spears a male white settler and is hanged by the military as Governor Arthur looks on
4. A hostile white settler shoots an Aboriginal man and is hanged by the military as Governor Arthur looks on.

(SAFE / R 247)

The Mitchell Library Board was purchased from J.W. Beattie in May 1919 for £30 (Morris 86), which is approximately $2,200 today. Importantly, the title of the record notes both the popular attribution of the Board and the mark which actually instigated the Board’s production: “Governor Davey’s [sic – actually Governor Arthur] Proclamation to the Aborigines, 1816 [sic – actually c. 1828-30].”

The date of the Board is still a cause of some speculation. The earlier date, 1828, marks the declaration of martial law (Turnbull 94) and 1830 marks the Black Line (Edmonds 215): the attempt to form a human line of white men to force many Tasmanian Aboriginals, four of the nine nations, onto the Tasman Peninsula (Ryan 3). Frankland’s suggestion for the Board was put forward on 4 February 1829, with Arthur’s official Conciliator to the Aborigines, G.A. Robinson, recording his first sighting of a Board on 24 December 1829 (Morris 84-85). Thus, the concept of the Board may have been in 1828 but the Proclamation project was not fully realised until 1830. Indeed, a news item on the Proclamation Board did appear in the popular press, but not until 5 March 1830:

We are informed that the Government have given directions for the painting of a large number of pictures to be placed in the bush for the contemplation of the Aboriginal Inhabitants. [...] However [...] the causes of their hostility must be more deeply probed, or their taste as connoisseurs in paintings more clearly established, ere we can look for any beneficial result from this measure. (Colonial Times 2)

The remark made in relation to becoming a connoisseur of painting, though intended to be derogatory, makes some sense. There was an assumption that the Indigenous peoples could easily translate a European-styled execution by hanging, as a visual metaphor for all forms of punishment. It has long been understood that Indigenous “social organisation and religious and ceremonial life were often as complex as those of the white invaders” (McColluch 261). However, the Proclamation Board was, in every sense, Eurocentric and made no attempt to acknowledge the complexities of Aboriginal culture. It was, quite simply, never going to be an effective tool of communication, nor achieve its socio-legal aims.

The Board Re-imagined: Popular Media

The re-imagining of the Proclamation Board as a construct of Governor Davey, instead of Governor Arthur, is just one of many re-imaginings of this curious object. There are, of course, the various imaginings of the purpose of the Board. On the surface these images are a tool for reconciliation but as “the story of these paintings unfolds [...] it becomes clear that the proclamations were in effect envoy sent back to Britain to exhibit the ingenious attempts being applied to civilise Australia” (Carroll 76). In this way the Board was re-imagined by the Administration that funded the exercise, even before the project was completed, from a mechanism to assist in the bringing about of peace into an object that would impress colonial superiors.

Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll has recently written about the Boards in the context of their “transnational circulation” and how “objects become subjects and speak of their past through the ventriloquism of contemporary art history” (75). Carroll argues the Board is an item that couples “military strategy with a fine arts propaganda campaign” (Carroll 78). Critically the Boards never achieved their advertised purpose for, as Carroll explains, there were “elaborate rituals Aboriginal Australians had for the dead” and, therefore, “the display of a dead, hanging body is unthinkable. [...] being exposed to the sight of a hanged man must have been experienced as an unimaginable act of disrespect” (92).

The Proclamation Board would, in sharp contrast to feelings of unimaginable disrespect, inspire feelings of pride across the colonial population. An example of this pride being revealed in the selection of the Board as an object worthy of reproduction, as a lithograph, for an Intercolonial Exhibition, held in Melbourne in 1866 (Morris 84). The lithograph, which identifies the Board as Governor Davey’s Proclamation to the Aborigines and dated 1816, was listed as item 572, of 738 items submitted by Tasmania, for the event (The Commissioners 69-85).

This type of reproduction, or re-imagining, of the Board would not be an isolated event. Penelope Edmonds has described the Board as producing a “visual vernacular” through a range of derivatives including lantern slides, lithographs, and postcards. These types of tourist ephemera are in addition to efforts to produce unique re-workings of the Board as seen in Violet Mace’s Proclamation glazed earthenware, which includes a jug (1928) and a pottery cup (1934) (Edmonds online).
The Proclamation Board offers numerous narratives. There is the story that the Board was designed and deployed to communicate. There is the story behind the Board. There is also the story of the credit for the initiative which was transferred from Governor Arthur to Governor Davey and subsequently returned to Arthur. There are, too, the provenance stories of individual Boards.

There is another story the Proclamation Board offers. The story of true crime in colonial Australia. The Board, as noted, presents through a four-strip pictogram an idea that all are equal under the rule of law (Arthur 1). Advocating for a society of equals was a duplicitous practice, for while Aborigines were hanged for allegedly murdering settlers, “there is no record of whites being charged, let alone punished, for murdering Aborigines” (Morris 84).

It would not be until 1838 that white men would be punished for the murder of Aboriginal people (on the mainland) in the wake of the Myall Creek Massacre, in northern New South Wales. There were other examples of attempts to bring about a greater equity under the rule of law but, as Amanda Nettelbeck explains, there was wide-spread resistance to the investigation and changing of colonists for crimes against the Indigenous population with cases regularly not going to trial, or, if making it to court, resulting in an acquittal (355-59). That such cases rested on “legally inadmissible Aboriginal testimony” (Reece in Nettelbeck 358) propped up a justice system that was, inherently, unjust in the nineteenth century.

It is important to note that commentators at the time did allude to the crime narrative of the Board:

when in the most civilized country in the world it has been found ineffective as example to hang murderers in chains, it is not to be expected a savage race will be influenced by the milder exhibition of effigy and caricature. (Colonial Times 2)

It is argued here that the Board was much more than an offering of effigy and caricature. The Proclamation Board presents, in striking detail, the formula for the modern true crime tale: a peace disturbed by the act of murder; and the ensuing search for, and delivery of, justice. Reinforcing this point, are the ideas of justice seen within crime fiction, a genre that focuses on the restoration of order out of chaos (James 174), are made visible here as aspirational. The true crime tale does not, consistently, offer the reassurances found within crime fiction. In the real world, particularly one as violent as colonial Australia, we are forced to acknowledge that, below the surface of the official rhetoric on justice and crime, the guilty often go free and the innocent are sometimes hanged.

Another point of note is that, if the latter date offered here, of 1830, is taken as the official date of the production of these Boards, then the significance of the Proclamation Board as a true crime tale is even more pronounced through a connection to crime fiction (both genres sharing a common literary heritage). The year 1830 marks the release of Australia's first novel, Proclamation Board and the nation's first full-length literary work, as also being the year that established the, now indomitable, traditions of true crime and crime fiction in Australia.

Conclusion

During the late 1820s in Van Diemen's Land (now Tasmania) a set of approximately 100 Proclamation Boards were produced by the Lieutenant Governor of the day, George Arthur. The official purpose of these items was to communicate, to the Indigenous peoples of the island colony, that all—black and white—were equal under the law. The Board, as a piece of aboriginal or colonial art, would be punished. The Board is a re-imaging of one of the traditional methods of communication for Indigenous peoples; the leaving of drawings on the bark of trees. The Board was, in the 1860s, in time for an Intercolonial Exhibition, re-imagined as the output of Lieutenant Governor Davey. This re-imaging of the Board was so effective that surviving artefacts, today, are popularly known as Governor Davey’s Proclamation to the Aborigines with the date modified, to 1816, to fit the new narrative. The Proclamation Board was also reimagined, by its creators and consumers, in a variety of ways: as peace offering; military propaganda; exhibition object; tourism ephemera; and contemporary art. This paper has also, briefly, offered another re-imagining of the Board, positing that this early “pamphlet” on justice and punishment actually presents a precursor to the modern Australian true crime tale. The Proclamation Board tells many stories but, at the core of this curious object, is a crime story: the story of mass murder.

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